



PART I

CHAPTER I

THE "PILGRIM"

The "Pilgrim", a schooner of 400 tons burden, had been fitted out in San Francisco for whaling in the southern seas. She¹ was a property of a wealthy Californian ship-owner James Weldon who sent his whalers to the Arctic regions and the Atlantic Ocean every year. The "Pilgrim" was one of the smallest vessels in his fleet but her sailing powers were great. Her excellent rigging let her reach the furthest border of solid ice field of the southern hemisphere without risk, carrying her small crew among the drifting icebergs.

¹ She – в англійській мові кораблям історично присвоєно жіночий рід

The crew of the "Pilgrim" consisted of five sailors and an apprentice and was commanded by Captain Hull, a great seaman and one of the best and the most experienced harpooners in Weldon's service. This amount was obviously not enough for whale-fishing that required men for boat mending and cutting up the whales after they were captured. But Mr. Weldon, like other ship-owners, found it more economical to embark at San Francisco only men needed for managing the ship. There were enough skillful seamen of all nationalities ready to work for the season in ports. When the fishing trip was over, they were paid and waited for another season to be recruited on another whaleboat. Such method of hiring men who could be at once discharged when their services were no longer needed helped ship-owners save plenty of money and make good profits from fisheries.

So did James Weldon fitting out the "Pilgrim".

The schooner had now just completed her voyage near the Antarctic Circle². There was, however, enough room left for whalebone in her holds. The barrels of whale oil were not full to the brim either. It was a hard time for whaling as repeated and vigorous attacks upon the whales had made them rather scarce.

This year had been unfortunate for the "Pilgrim". At the beginning of January, almost in the height of the southern summer, long before the ordinary time of return, Captain Hull had to abandon the hunting place and sail toward Auckland³ on the east coast of North Island. His hired crew, rather doubtful men, turned out to be idlers. Captain Hull wished to part with them on the earliest possible opportunity. The

² the Antarctic Circle – Південне полярне коло

³ Auckland [ˈɔːklənd] – Окленд (найбільше місто Нової Зеландії)

ship's permanent crew was angry. Never before had the schooner returned with such a small catch. They ought to have had at least two hundred barrels more. But the most disappointed of all was Captain Hull himself. After arriving at the port, he tried to hire new people, but everything was in vain. It was too late as every seaman had already been recruited to other whaleboats. When Captain Hull was about to leave Auckland he was asked to take some passengers aboard. He could not refuse the request.

At that time Mrs. Weldon, James Weldon's wife, their five-year-old son Jack and their relative known by the name of Cousin Benedict happened to be in Auckland. James Weldon, who had business in New Zealand, had brought his family here and intended to come back home to San Francisco with them; but little Jack got so seriously ill that it was impossible for him to continue such a long journey. Mr. Weldon, whose affairs demanded his immediate return, could do nothing but leave his family in Auckland and sail to America alone.

Three months had passed away, three long months of separation that seemed to Mrs. Weldon an eternity. Little Jack had recovered from his illness and they all could leave for home. It was then that the "Pilgrim" arrived at the port. The vessel was in perfect condition and the weather was quite favourable for a long journey that would last from forty to fifty days. So Captain accepted Mrs. Weldon's request and placed his own cabin at her entire disposal. Mrs. Weldon herself had accompanied her husband in so many voyages that the sea did not frighten her at all. She was a brave, high-spirited woman of about thirty years old in good health and ready to endure all the hardships of sailing. She knew that Captain Hull was an excellent seaman

and that her husband trusted him entirely. So she took the opportunity to return home safely.

Cousin Benedict had to accompany her. He was a man of about fifty, very tall and skinny with dishevelled hair and glasses on his nose. He was one of those kind and harmless scientists who were always like children. He was awkward and helpless, unable to take care of himself. He seemed to belong to the world of plants rather than humans. Despite all that he was loved for his kind heart. He was like a son to Mrs. Weldon, like an elder brother to her little Jack.

It should be noted that Cousin Benedict was not lazy at all. On the contrary, his all time was devoted to one absorbing passion for natural history. He dedicated all his life to collecting and observing insects. Every available time he spent in the pursuit of his favourite science both by day and in his dreams at night. His hat, the sleeves and collar of his coat were filled with pins and looked like a showcase with a great collection of the most diverse insects. Nobody could even count how many of them there were. Every time when Cousin Benedict came back from a ramble in the countryside, he covered his hat with all sorts of insects that were pinned both inside and outside.

His passion for insects, in fact, was the reason why he had accompanied Mr. and Mrs. Weldon to New Zealand. He was eager to add some new and rare specimens to his invaluable collection and wanted to return to San Francisco as soon as possible to sort them out in his extensive cabinet. Cousin Benedict kept all his valuable insects in a special box which he insured at a fabulous sum of money. He sincerely believed it was the most precious cargo on the ship, worth far more than oil and whalebone altogether.